

Note on the Seasonal change of Plumage in the males of the Purple Honeysucker (Arachnechthra asiatica) and of an analogous American bird (Coereba cyanea).—By F. FINN, B.A., F.Z.S., Deputy Superintendent, Indian Museum.

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Dr. Jerdon in his "Birds of India" (Vol I, p. 370) and Captain Shelley, in his Monograph of the *Cinnyridae*, agree in assigning to the male of our common Purple Honeysucker (*Arachnechthra asiatica*) besides its characteristic dress, a plumage much resembling that of the female, but marked with a broad purple streak down the ventral surface. Dr H. Gadow, however, in the British Museum Catalogue volume (IX, p. 58), dealing with these birds, ignores this change of plumage; and Mr. Oates, in his "Birds of British Burmah" (Vol. I, p. 322), states that the change does not take place in that country, "for full-plumaged males may be obtained all the year round." He believes also that the young males of this species are clothed in female plumage all through their first winter, and thinks that the abundance of such has probably given rise to the belief in a change of plumage.

With all due deference to the opinion of so excellent an ornithologist as Mr. Oates, however, I venture to suggest that he is wrong, and that the authors previously cited are right, with respect to this change of plumage, at any rate in Indian examples.

In the first place, the presence of full-plumaged birds all the year round is of very little weight in disproving this change. Marked individual variations occur in the period of change of plumage by birds which possess more than one dress, and specimens of such species may be found in more or less full-plumage and undress at the same date, as I have myself seen in Ducks and Dabchicks.

This consideration disposes, I think, of Mr. Oates' first argument, but I have better evidence to bring forward.

About the middle of July last year (1897) in view of my approaching visit to England on leave, I procured a number of Honeysuckers in the hope of being able to take some alive to the London Zoological Gardens, where such birds have never previously been exhibited. All the birds I kept, with one exception, were *Arachnechthra zeylonica*, but I had, and brought home safely, one male specimen of the species I am now considering.

This bird, when I got it, was in heavy moult, and mostly purple in colour, but to my great surprise (I had taken it for a young male assuming full-plumage) it gradually lost this hue, and by the time I

started for England, in the first week in August, it was in the non-breeding dress, brown above and yellow below, with the median purple streak, but still retaining the orange axillary tufts.

This specimen, unfortunately, only survived its advent at the Zoological Gardens for about a fortnight* and I do not know whether it was preserved; if it was, it was probably put in spirit, as the moult had never been properly completed, and so the plumage was in bad order. It had, however, lived long enough to show that the change above referred to does really take place; for that captivity could have so affected the bird as to change the colour of the actually growing feathers, I am not inclined to admit, and I therefore conclude that the accounts which give this bird a change of plumage are quite correct.

While on this subject, it seemed to me that I might draw the attention of ornithologists to a similar change, apparently hitherto unrecorded, in a bird which, though not believed to be allied to our Sunbirds, and inhabiting the New World, nevertheless in form and habits presents at least an analogical resemblance to these. I allude to the Yellow-winged Blue Sugar-bird (*Coereba cyanea*) of which several specimens have been exhibited in the London Zoological Society's Gardens.

During my previous acquaintance with the species there, I had been struck by the change of plumage that the male appeared to undergo, and when in England last September, I found the Society's single specimen, a male which had been acquired as long ago as 1890, actually passing into the full violet plumage from the undress stage, which had been olive-green above, and yellowish below, much resembling the coloration of the female. The tail was black, and the wings yellow and black, and the legs pink-red, as in the male in full plumage. In fact,

* I ascribe my small measure of success with living Sunbirds to the fact that I fed them too much on "slops" — sweetened milk or milk-sop. In addition to some such food given at first it would, I think, be well to supply crumbled yolk of hard-boiled egg mixed with powdered sugar, and to keep them as much on this as possible, with fruit also. None of the *Arachnethra zeylonica* I had survived the voyage but one, and this died in the train *en route* from Plymouth to London. I saw this bird bullying the *A. asiatica* one occasion at least, and I had previously noticed that the latter bird appeared somewhat to fear its companions. When all were together in a big cage in Calcutta it kept almost entirely to one twig in the branch put in this cage, and was in general less active in its movements than *A. zeylonica*, though it seemed less sensitive to cold on the voyage. None of the male *A. zeylonica*, some of which were moulting, showed any sign of changing their bright plumage for a duller one, as suggested by Captain Shelley in his account of the species in the Monograph above quoted. Neither did they molest each other, while I remember having had to separate two male specimens of *A. asiatica* which I had previously kept, because one was getting so badly bullied by the other.

F. F.

the bird presented much the same appearance as a skin (21280 in Register, exhibited on this occasion) in the Museum collection, except that there were many more violet feathers visible.

The keepers I consulted bore me out as to the regular occurrence of the change of plumage in the male of this species; and one was of the opinion that the quills and tail changed also; but this I do not recollect seeing myself. Unfortunately this bird also soon after died, and was not preserved.

The existence of this change of colouration in the male of a *Coereba* is interesting as tending to confirm the views of those naturalists (Dr. Sclater and Messrs. Baird, Brewer and Ridgway), who place the *Coerebidae* in close connection with the Tanagers, in which group the male of *Pyrranga rubra* exhibits a similar seasonal alteration of plumage.



Note on the Long-Snouted Whip-Snake (Dryophis mycterizans).—By F. FINN, B.A., F.Z.S., Deputy Superintendent, Indian Museum.

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A common belief in India accredits the Whip-Snake with the propensity for deliberately striking at the eye. As this trait is not alluded to by either Dr. Günther or Dr. Boulenger in their accounts of the Indian Reptilia, I venture here to bring forward an instance which shows that the notion above noticed is really correct.

On December 1st, 1897, a bird-catcher, with whom I had previously had dealings, brought to my quarters two specimens of the Long-Snouted Whip-Snake (*Dryophis mycterizans*) for sale. Knowing them to be harmless, and the vendor having no fear of them, I took both in my hands and went to show them to a friend who was in an adjoining room; the larger one* having meanwhile struck at my hand, without breaking the skin. As I was exhibiting the snakes, I was rather unpleasantly surprised by finding this large specimen suddenly dart at my eye, and inflict a bite on it, which, as I had instinctively closed the threatened organ, only resulted in some small punctures on the eyelids, which were just sufficient to draw a little blood. The position of these, two on the upper, and one on the lower eyelid, sufficiently shows, I think, the deliberateness of the reptile's aim. Of course I suffered no inconvenience from the bite, although on rubbing my eye

* This stuffed skin of this specimen was exhibited, together with a sketch of the bitten eye made by the Museum artist, to show the position of the tooth-marks.